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ABSTRACT

A developmentally appropriate creative writing program for kindergarten children that included peer interaction and teacher-student discussion was studied to ascertain whether program participants would attain significantly higher oral language scores than did nonparticipants. The writing program was implemented in one of two half-day kindergarten classes for approximately 4 months. Two or three times a week, after the daily story or a hands-on experience such as cooking, children in the intervention class were asked to write or draw something about the story, the group experience, or a topic of their own choosing. They were encouraged to talk about their experience with classmates and the teacher while they wrote. Once a week, children would read their stories to a partner, the teacher would choose some stories to read, or a few students would share their stories with the whole class. Students in the other class participated in a daily story time, but only occasionally drew pictures or took part in teacher conferences or group discussions. Eleven children in each class were matched on pre-kindergarten screening test scores for purposes of comparison. These children's scores on the Structured Photographic Expressive Language Test suggested that the creative writing program positively affected participants' oral language growth. (RH)

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PROMOTING ORAL LANGUAGE GROWTH IN KINDERGARTEN THROUGH CREATIVE WRITING

BY

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B.A., North Central College, 1966

THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in Education
in the Graduate School of
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I. INTRODUCTION

One of the major goals of any kindergarten curriculum program is language development. Generally, this goal refers to oral language, as most children are not considered developmentally ready for written language when they enter school. That this is a worthwhile goal is evidenced not only by long-standing tradition but also by more recent research which demonstrates a positive correlation between children's maturity in speech development and their degree of success in learning to read (Ollila, 1980). Similarly, Ruth Strickland's classic study of the language growth of 575 elementary school students indicates that oral language facility is directly related to overall academic achievement (1962, as cited by Hennings, 1986). Loban also reports a positive correlation among speaking, listening, reading, and writing abilities in a long-term longitudinal study tracing the language development of 338 kindergartners (1963, 1976, as cited by Hennings, 1986).

As these examples demonstrate, skills in oral language (speaking, listening) are important in written language (writing, reading) acquisition. Often, however, the connection between the two types of language has been ignored with too much attention given to isolated skill development

rather than to activities fostering integration (Early Childhood and Literacy Development Committee of the International Reading Association, 1986).

The connection between reading and writing, especially in the early years, has recently received a good deal of study and popularity. From the older Language Experience Approach (Ashton-Warner, 1964) to the more recent conference approach of Donald Graves (1983), it is clear that educators are beginning to recognize and facilitate a partnership between reading and writing. The connection between oral and written language, however, has not been as effectively studied or implemented.

The program described in this project was conceived and designed to study the oral-written language relationship as well as to seek alternatives to the somewhat restrictive (albeit effective) Show and Tell approach to oral language development in kindergarten. The possibility that oral language might be strengthened by a well-designed creative writing program is certainly suggested by a statement from the Commission on Reading (Becoming a Nation of Readers): "All of the uses of language -- listening, speaking, reading, and writing -- are interrelated and mutually supportive. It follows, therefore, that school activities that foster

one of the language arts will benefit the others as well" (Anderson et al., 1985, p. 79).

In attempting to design a program for kindergartners, it is important that materials, methods, and content be developmentally appropriate. The enthusiastic teacher response to creative writing from kindergarten on suggests that a creative writing program is both appropriate and desirable at the kindergarten level (Bissex, 1981; Turbill, 1982; Dyson and Genishi, 1982; Hubbard, 1985). Hence, the project described herein was developed not only to provide information on the oral-written language connection but also to provide developmentally appropriate curriculum for kindergarten children.

For this project, one class of kindergartners participated in a creative writing program designed to include peer interaction and teacher/student conferencing with written products generally in the form of pictures and symbols. Its intention was to encourage only those written responses for which the children were developmentally ready while hopefully strengthening the verbal skills considered important in future school success. The study was designed to investigate whether students participating in the creative writing program would have statistically significant, higher oral language scores at

its finish than a group of children who did not receive the intervention. Included in the study was a reading of literature dealing with the oral-written language relationship.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Fox, in an article dealing with past and current research on oral language development, presents a detailed historical review of studies in child language learning (1983). In it, she describes some of the differences in the goals and findings in studies done since 1900. First attempts to study language acquisition focused on individual case studies often done by parents. These were followed by more "scientific" investigations of large groups of subjects which compared many of the demographic characteristics of children -- girls vs. boys, only child vs. one with siblings, etc.

Since the introduction of Chomsky's theory of language (1965), called transformational generative grammar, many researchers have described the acquisition of language as a process in which children experiment with language data, draw and test hypotheses, and then revise these hypotheses or rules according to the feedback they receive (Bissex, 1981; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Hennings, 1986). These studies have focused on the interactional nature of language and the importance of the social settings in which it takes

place. Researchers focusing on early adult-child and child-child interactions in the home have discovered some of the following characteristics of interactional language:

1. It is situation-specific.
2. It has many and varied functions.
3. It focuses on meaning, not form.
4. It is social in nature, building trust.
5. It is negotiated, that is the child affects the caretaker as much as the caretaker affects the child.
6. It is framed by the caretaker who clarifies, highlights, and elaborates the child's speech and who seldom corrects grammatical errors but frequently corrects meaning.

(Piazza and Tomlinson, 1985, p. 150).

Many educators are beginning to understand the relevance of this natural or developmental way of acquiring language in the classroom setting. Here, too, children need opportunities to talk freely with peers and adults who are interested empathetic listeners. Communicative interaction seems to be a critical factor in all forms of language learning (Hood, 1980, and van der Geest, 1977, as cited by Taylor et al., 1986). Understanding and the ability to formulate and express ideas come through what Lewis terms the "tug and pull of verbal exchange" (1979). Children acquire language most easily through reciprocal language situations, which are not often present in a typical school

setting. Because of this discrepancy, Fox recommends that teachers make an effort to talk with children. She says:

> The ways in which a teacher talks in general, and talks with students specifically, can extend and enrich children's growth in communicative competence, in oral language. If a teacher understands that conversations may be invitations to talk rather than question and answer situations, that students need to blend what they know with what is new, and that replies facilitate growth more than assessment of performances, then that teacher is truly encouraging language learning in the classroom (p. 241).

Recent research of children's writing has shown that learning to write is similar to learning to talk (Mavrogenes, 1986). Just as children learn to talk by talking, they learn to write by writing. In both instances, children learn best in an environment that encourages experimentation and provides an approving audience. In learning to talk, for example, "when a toddler says 'ady' instead of Father, we do not worry that the child will fixate on bad habits. We are not afraid to let children talk as best they can. We view their errors as closer and closer approximations. We delight in whatever the baby can do" (Calkins, 1983, p. 13). Ferreiro states that children must also be allowed to "reinvent writing and thereby make it their own" (1978, p. 39, as cited by Fox, 1983, p. 178).

Similarly, many educators believe that teachers need to model the meaning-before-form kind of interaction with their students (Early Childhood and Literacy Development Committee of the International Reading Association, 1986). In the writing process, they must become active, listening participants who are willing to follow the child's lead, occasionally questioning and providing examples of messages that communicate, emphasizing meaning before spelling and grammatical structure.

Teachers should also provide opportunities for student interaction. Peers, who generally respond to meaning before form, can facilitate each other's development. Piazza and Tomlinson, in their study of kindergarten classrooms, observed that, "many of the positive elements present in homes where early writing occurs are also present in classroom contexts created during table talk between students when writing" (1985, p. 157). Among these elements were a non-threatening atmosphere, idea elaboration, an immediate audience, and "invented spelling" (children are encouraged to write in their own manner and form, thus allowing them to concentrate on meaning making).

Since 1980, many educators have been experimenting with a type of writing program which combines much peer interaction with a teacher-child conference approach

(Bissex, 1981; Hubbard, 1985; Dyson and Genishi, 1982; Turbill, 1982). Donald Graves, a leader in this field, has created an approach which focuses on the teacher/child individual conference with the additional components of student choice of topic, invented spelling, and peer interaction and sharing (1983). For older students, adult conventionalities of spelling and grammar are taught/learned as the writer begins to feel the need to communicate more effectively. For pre-writing children, pictures and symbols become the "written" product. Drawings, "another form of writing down meanings, of representing graphically what we know" (Bissex, 1981, p. 786), and invented spelling are very common and appropriate at this stage.

The general response to Graves' approach has been positive, with proponents demonstrating its effectiveness in promoting student growth in the areas of reading and writing (Bissex, 1981; Hubbard, 1985; Dyson and Genishi, 1982; Turbill, 1982). It would seem, however, that given the amount of verbal interaction suggested by the Graves method, as well as the theoretical connection between all types of language, this writing program would also lead to a growth in oral language. Hubbard, who uses this program, made

reference to this connection in discussing her first graders' whole class sharing sessions and daily writing discussions:

> It is an important time for the students to develop their oral language using this mode to sort through their experiences with the help of supportive community. Children need time to talk about their writing: they need opportunities to "write-and-tell" (1985, p. 629).

Similarly, Fox believes that as children learn to like writing and consider it an everyday activity, all their language skills improve. Specifically, "Encoding helps decoding as well as oral language, listening, and questioning" (1983, p. 178).

Hence, an interactional, developmentally appropriate writing program would seem to be an effective way to stimulate oral language growth in young children. This project was designed to study the written-oral language connection, as well as to increase the limited, related literature.

III. THE STUDY

Design

From October, 1987, until mid-January, 1988, a creative writing program was implemented with one of two half-day kindergarten classes at Monee Elementary School in the Crete-Monee School District. The students in the two classes were mixed in terms of age (5-6), race (black-white), family income (low-middle), and background (rural-urban). Based on the Graves approach, the ten-week program included peer and teacher/student interaction. Two or three times a week, following the daily storytime (or occasionally after a hands-on experience such as cooking), the children in the intervention class were asked to write/draw something about the story, the group experience, or a topic of their own choosing. Sometimes a brief discussion was held about what they might want to write. The children were encouraged to "do the best you can" or "spell it like it sounds" (Martinez and Teale, 1987, p. 447), when appropriate. As they wrote, they were encouraged to talk and share with their classmates and with the teacher.

Although the original design included a private teacher/student conference with each child at least once a

week, it was decided that frequent teacher/student discussions at the child's table would be more effective for the following reasons:

1. Many of the students wanted to share with the teacher each time they wrote.
2. Sharing an original writing at this level is usually brief.
3. Other students nearby seemed to benefit from overheard conversations between teacher and student.

Although the focus of these discussions was on meaning, not form, the teacher sometimes made suggestions, especially regarding phonetic aspects of words for those using invented spelling. At the student's request, his/her dictated story was written in "grown-up" writing, though care was taken not to give the impression that his/her writing was wrong. Often the rest of the class would go on to another activity while those who requested it continued to dictate their stories.

Once a week, stories were shared in a more organized fashion. The children would read their stories to a partner, the teacher would choose some stories to read, or a few students would share their creations with the whole class. These activities provided a wider audience as well as effective models for the writers. All stories were dated, and some were sent home, while others were kept in individual folders to be reviewed later or shared with parents at conference time.

The other kindergarten class, the control group, participated during this time period in the daily storytime with only occasional pictures drawn and no teacher/student discussion or group sharing.

In order to establish some degree of equivalency between the intervention and control groups, the children were matched according to scores received on a pre-kindergarten screening test. This method was chosen because:

1. There is a strong language component to the test.
2. Informal followup observations have shown a positive correlation between scores on this instrument and future reading (language) achievement.
3. It is the only relevant statistical information available for all the children at the beginning of kindergarten.

For statistical purposes, eleven children in each class were chosen, as their scores on the screening instrument exactly matched the scores of one of their counterparts in the other class.

During the third week of January, these twenty-two children were administered an individual, oral expressive language test. The Structured Photographic Expressive Language Test - II (SPELT-II) is a nationally-normed test in which children are asked to talk about photographs. This test seemed appropriate for the study, as it measures

oral language, was easy to administer and score, and includes a correction factor for speakers of black dialect, some of whom were present in both classes. The teacher administered the test to half the children in each group, and an early childhood specialist tested the other half.

The "experiment" itself was limited by the following factors:

1. The intervention group met in the morning, the control in the afternoon.
2. The subjects for the two groups were not randomly selected, as their class assignment determined their group.
3. Many possibly influential factors such as age, socio-economic status, and racial/ethnic group were not considered.
4. The number of subjects was small.
5. The screening instrument used for the original matching was not designed specifically to test oral language.

While beyond the scope of this project, these elements should probably be more carefully controlled in any future projects purporting to show a positive connection between creative writing and oral language growth. Time of day, for example, could be a factor in the mental and physical alertness of the students, thus affecting their ability to learn. Demographic characteristics are also very important in any kind of educational research as values, previous experiences,and parental expectations have been shown to be influential in the

learning process. While this study did have an equal mix of 5/6-year-olds, black/white, and low/middle income children, no attempt was made to differentiate or equalize these factors.

Results

Several observations can be made regarding the results of the testing done at the end of this project. First, it is interesting to note that in seven of the eleven matched pairs, the intervention group received higher scores. Secondly, applying the Difference of Means Test revealed a significant difference only at the $p < .10$ level. However, considering the fact that the direction of the results had already been suggested in the original problem statement of the study, and that the subjects had been paired according to test scores prior to intervention, a one-tailed Dependent Measures Design seemed in order. This analysis yielded a significant difference at the $p < .05$ level.

Statistically, then, the creative writing program seems to have positively affected the oral language growth of the students. Those participating in the intervention demonstrated more growth.

TABLE I - RAW DATA

Paired Subjects		X (intervention)	Y (control)	Difference
	1.	38	37	1
	2.	40	40	0
	3.	43	45	-2
	4.	46	38	8
	5.	47	43	4
	6.	49	37	12
	7.	44	38	6
	8.	41	40	1
	9.	46	45	1
	10.	45	45	0
	11.	47	49	-2

TABLE II - STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Difference of Means Test

	Mean	SD
Group 1 (X)	44.18	3.37
Group 2 (Y)	41.55	4.06

$t = 1.65, p < .10$

Dependent Measures Design

$\bar{X} = 2.636$
$SD = 4.41$

$t = 1.98, p < .05$

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In addition to statistically significant oral language growth, this writing program seems to have had other positive results. The characteristic of individualization is one by which most educational programs are evaluated, and many fall short. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), which believes that a major determinant of program quality is its developmental appropriateness, states that quality programs are both age appropriate and individually appropriate (1987). The writing program implemented in this project seems to fulfill both objectives.

The four writing examples in the appendix, taken at the end of the project, are representative of the individualization that is provided for in this program. Aaron never attempted to do any writing, but his drawings became more and more detailed, and he always wanted the teacher to write for him. Unable to orally construct a complete sentence initially, Tanya was able to do so consistently after four months. As Sarah began to attach sounds to symbols, she began her own invented spelling. Marc eventually wrote his own

words, asking for help on those he did not know. Hence, each child progressed at his/her own rate, and all seemed to enjoy producing at their own developmental level. In addition, the teacher had many opportunities to interact with each child, thus strengthening her knowledge of and ability to work with individual levels of development.

Another benefit of this program was the amount of social interaction it provided. In sharing their stories with each other, the children became givers and receivers. Hubbard suggests that in this type of writing environment children learn "acceptance and how to be interested in each other" (1985).

In addition, Piagetian researchers cite social interaction, i.e. the exchanging of points of view, as very important to the individual's construction of knowledge and the ability to think logically and critically (Long and Bulgarella, 1985). The International Reading Association, in a similar vein, states that affective and cognitive growth are fostered through opportunities to communicate thoughts and feelings (Early Childhood and Literacy Development Committee, 1986). For Turbill, "writing is increasingly seen as thinking itself" (1986, p. 93), and Hennings suggests that:

> As children orally retell, describe, sum up, hypothesize, invent, and judge, they are refining their ability to think logically. Simultaneously, they are acquiring the language patterns and vocabulary to communicate thought. In this respect, oral language is thinking time (1986, p. 14).

These educators indicate that logical, critical thinking skills are encouraged by oral and written attempts at communication. The creative writing program described in this project provided many opportunities for these types of activities.

Unfortunately, much of what educators now know about optimal conditions for early language acquisition, as well as critical thinking skill development, is not being reflected in actual classroom practice. The current interest in early childhood education, coupled with misconceptions on the part of administrators and parents about how young children learn, has lead to some very inappropriate practices in preschools and kindergartens. As O'Neil noted, "The current focus on providing early learning experiences places an added importance on developing programs based on sound principles" (1988, p. 6). Day agrees that, "We are now at the beginning of a tremendous wave of growth in early childhood programming, and now is the time to say... we can and will make every

programming decision with a focus on providing optimal services " (as quoted by O'Neil, 1988, p. 6).

The writing program described and evaluated in this research shows strong possibilities for becoming a method for providing such services in that it encourages an age and individually appropriate, integrated approach to language acquisition. In order for the program to reach its full potential, however, it needs to be fully incorporated into the kindergarten curriculum -- not just as an add-on, as in this study. Fox suggests that children can learn to write at least as well as they can talk if provided with a "rich and meaningful print environment, varied opportunities for individual exploration, and a willing, supportive audience" (1983, p. 178). NAEYC suggests that children need many opportunities to view reading and writing as useful activities before they are formally instructed in letter names, sounds, and word identification (1987). In order for this writing program to achieve maximum success, it must be part of a total literate environment which encourages individual experimentation and growth.

While educators seem to be making progress in their search for understanding of what constitutes appropriate early childhood education (witness, for example, the new Early

Childhood Consortium being formed by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development -- see ASCD Update, March, 1988), convincing administrators and parents remains a major goal for those instituting new programs. Beginning with instruction on how young children learn, teachers using a writing program such as the one researched in this study must be able to demonstrate for all interested parties that these kinds of programs are simply an extension of the way in which children have already been acquiring literacy skills at home. While early indications are that developmentally appropriate programs facilitate enjoyment of learning for students, further research is needed to demonstrate that children so instructed do, in fact, perform as well (or better) in school as those formally instructed from an early age. Teachers, parents, and administrators need this information.

The study described in this research, while demonstrating positive results, is only the beginning of a sound creative writing program. In contributing additional information in the area of creative writing for young children, this project has added to the limited amount of related literature. As suggested previously, much work remains in the areas of research, curriculum integration, and

public education. The challenge, however, is an exciting one and promises important dividends in the area of early childhood education.

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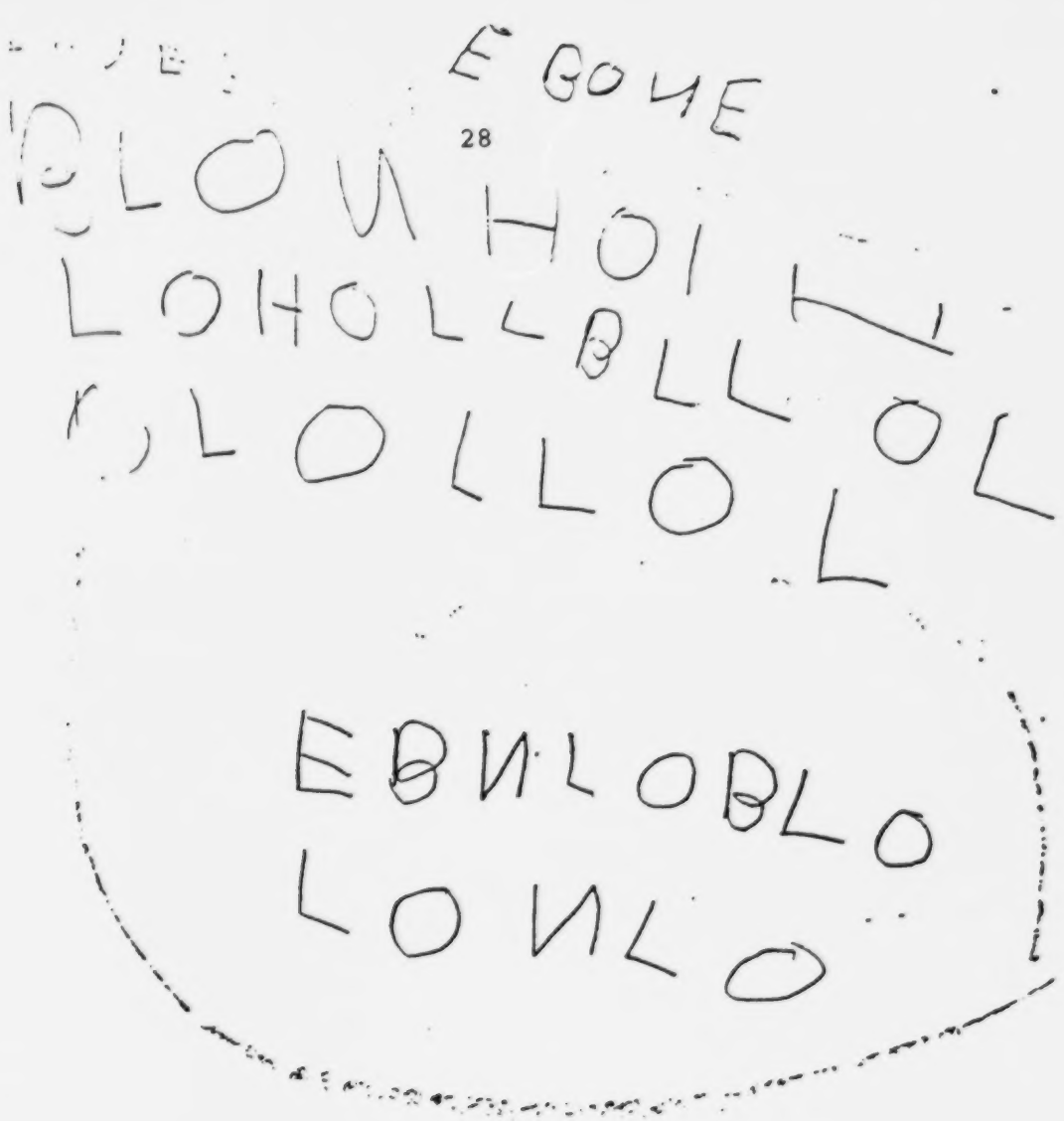
APPENDIX - STUDENT SAMPLES

27
I'm trying to get to sleep and Sparkle is laying on my bed.
Aaron

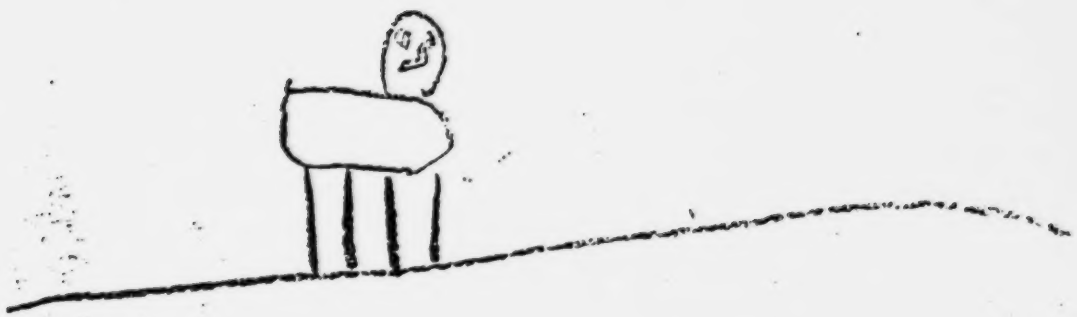


I like to play in the snow, and when my momma comes, she cleans me off, and I go to bed.

Tanya

I WT 2 BMS
ADGEFiKD

I want to buy myself a dog if I could.



Sarah

My cat is sitting on a chair.

Marc